

Instability can benefit teams with different expertise

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Co-workers who team up to solve problems or work on projects can benefit when they have less in common and take turns spotlighting their different expertise, according to new research from The University of

Texas at Austin. The findings have implications for how managers can better form and manage teams so all voices are heard.

Groups of workers with varied knowledge—or "knowledge-diverse teams"—share more information among [group members](#), a key trait of effective teamwork. As individuals with diverse knowledge and skills share their expertise, their influence ebbs and flows to the overall benefit of the team, said Steven Gray, assistant professor of management at UT Austin's McCombs School of Business.

"For teams, instability is often seen as a negative," Gray said. "But we found a scenario in which instability is helpful. Within a diverse team, this type of fluidity helps members bolster their position and standing by demonstrating their expertise and unique value."

Even so, homogenous teams—ones made up of members with similar knowledge and skills—share more when members' influence over time is stable.

A knowledge-diverse new product development team could include a scientist, engineer, operations expert and a marketer, while a startup team may have a [chief technology officer](#), chief marketing officer and chief financial officer. In contrast, a homogenous team might be made of sales members who do the same task but may have different kinds of customers.

The research is online in advance in the *Academy of Management Journal*.

Gray co-authored the research with J. Stuart Bunderson of Washington University in St. Louis; Gerben S. van der Vegt and Floor Rink, both of the Netherlands' University of Groningen; and Yeliz Gedik of Firat University in Turkey.

The researchers recruited MBA students to survey teams across industries. The 156 teams surveyed were mostly based in Europe and were from sectors including [information technology](#), health care, hospitality, finance, manufacturing and agriculture.

Students administered three written surveys—two team member surveys and one supervisor survey—collecting data on job roles, educational background and demographic information. They asked how [team members](#) perceived one another's influence and about team processes. Supervisors rated team performance.

The researchers found that diverse teams with equal levels of influence shared 5% less information than diverse teams with more fluid leadership dynamics.

For these teams, stable hierarchies are harmful, the researchers said, because the nature of problems a team addresses over time is not constant or static. Instability or fluidity in diverse team dynamics might help better elicit everyone's divergent views.

Homogenous team members, or those whose skills are more aligned, however, shared 15% more information when the team's leadership dynamics were more stable over time. When these teams had fluid dynamics, people tended to share less.

The research offers important lessons for both managers and teams.

Workers who are a part of a knowledge-diverse team where influence diverges should know that by sharing information, they can demonstrate their worth to co-workers and gain greater influence and trust within the team. Gray said managers need to understand that it's insufficient to bring together people with diverse knowledge and simply set them on a task. Instead, managers of knowledge-diverse teams need to think about

how they can help to elevate different viewpoints as tasks evolve. Managers of homogenous teams should mull how they might promote stability so members don't compete for status.

"Instability in homogenous teams can be a disaster," Gray said. "It's far worse than the magnitude of the benefits of fluidity in diverse knowledge [teams](#)."

More information: Steven M. Gray et al, Leveraging Knowledge Diversity in Hierarchically Differentiated Teams: The Critical Role of Hierarchy Stability, *Academy of Management Journal* (2022). [DOI: 10.5465/amj.2020.1136](#)

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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